POVERTY AND LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES OF FEMALE-HEADED HOUSEHOLDS IN RURAL ETHIOPIA: THE CASE OF LIBO KEMKEM WOREDA, SOUTH GONDAR

Synopsis of the thesis submitted to the award of the Degree of the Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

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1. Introduction

Poverty is a widespread problem that affects many people in the world. Social scientists, who are mainly concerned with the issues of poverty, estimated there are about 1.4 billion people living on less than US$1.25[1] a day and close to 1 billion people suffering from hunger (UN 2009). Among the world's poor, 70 percent of them are ruralists, contrasted with 30 percent for urban areas (IFAD 2010).

The majority of the poor in developed and developing worlds are women, who are as many as 70 percent of the world's poor (Chant 2010). A major report on the state of world rural poverty by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD 2010) concludes that rural women in developing countries were among the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. The alarming evidence concerning the underlying trends for this process strongly indicates that the gender composition of the poor is veering towards a greater share of women (Narasaiah 2004; Kabeer 2003).

Especially, female-headed households (FHHs on wards) are the poorest people among rural women. In spite of the growth in the numbers and the enormous responsibilities placed on FHHs, they lack access to sufficient resources to effectively nurture their families and manage households (IFAD 2010). It makes it hard for many FHHs to survive economically and enjoy a decent standard of living. This makes FHHs with a single source of income, with no other support for sustenance, economically vulnerable. Such vulnerability stems from inequality in gender positions in society; and the low economic status of women exacerbated by exposure to open market economies, and deterioration of the economic conditions spurred by globalization. This leaves FHHs in a perpetual cycle of poverty, barely satisfying basic needs of their members (IFAD 2010; Chant 2007).

Ethiopia is one of the developing countries that share the aforementioned features of poverty and the formation and rise of FHHs. She is the second most populous country in sub-Saharan Africa. The majority of people in Ethiopia are living in rural areas where the incidence and severity of poverty is higher than urban areas. About 38.7 % of the population is below the nationally defined poverty line in

[1] In August 2008, the World Bank presented a major overhaul to their estimates of global poverty or international poverty line from "dollar-a-day" to USD 1.25 (Shah 2011:2; Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2009:1).

2004/05, while it is 39.3 % for rural population and 35.1% for urban population (DPRD & MOFED 2008).

The focus of this study is, therefore, on the analysis of poverty of rural FHHs at Libo Kemkem *Woreda* of South Gondar Administrative Zone in Amhara National Regional State (ANRS)[2]. The analysis also includes their survival strategies, which helps them to improve their status in the society.

2. Identification of the Problem

Ethiopia, one of the poorest countries in the world, is Africa's third most populous country with a population of 74 million in 2007 census. Almost 84% of the population live in rural areas and are dependent on local agriculture to meet their food needs (CSA 2008). Partly due to this fact there is a general understanding among scholars that the incidence of poverty is highest in the rural areas of the country (MOI 2001).

Ethiopia's economy is based mainly on agriculture, including crop and livestock production. Agriculture contributes 45% of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP), more than 80% of employment opportunities and over 90% of the foreign exchange earnings of the country (MoA 2010). However, the Ethiopian economy, particularly agricultural development, is extremely vulnerable to external shocks like climate change, global price fluctuations of exports and imports and other external factors.

Nearly 84% of Ethiopian women reside in rural areas (CSA 2008). Rural women integrated into the rural economy, which is basically labor intensive and exacts a heavy physical burden on all including children. Even though rural women make a significant contribution to the agricultural sector, similar to women in other parts of the developing world, they are usually vulnerable to poverty. Especially FHHs are among those that are hit the hardest by the incidence of poverty in rural areas of the country. This is mainly due to the poor social and economic conditions of women, which result from gender inequalities and discrimination that prevail in the country (Ellis and Tassew 2005; Action Aid 2008; Farnthworth and Tamene 2010; MOFED 2010; IFAD 2010).

[2] Amhara National Regional State (ANRS) is one of the states found in Ethiopia.

The situation of poverty in Amhara region is seen to be most severe. It suffers from both chronic and transitory food security problems in 49 declared drought prone areas (Middlebrook 2003). About 87.4% of the inhabitants of the region are agrarian and depend on rain-fed agricultural production system for subsistence (CSA 2008). These statistics show the concentrations of poverty in highly populous rural areas (Frank 1999; Middlebrook 2003). Women in this region are estimated to represent about 49.59% of the entire population of the region (CSA 2008) and are the worst victims of poverty. The poverty situation of FHHs in particular is seen to be more severe, which stems basically from the shortage of decisive livelihood assets such as land, livestock, and labor (Middlebrook 2003).

Libo Kemkem *Woreda* is situated in South Gondar Administrative Zone of Amhara Region, Ethiopia. It is prone to food insecurity and flooding, and is known through the 22 out of 29 are related to rural *kebele*s food insecure. Moreover, gender-bias against women in this area is deeply ingrained in the society placing FHHs at potentially a greater risk of poverty. FHHs in this *Woreda* are usually disadvantaged in terms of access to land, livestock, credit, other assets, and education, health care and extension service (Mossa 2010; Tekalign and Gezahagn 2003).

Thus, studying the relationship between FHHs and poverty in this area makes it instructive and important from both academic and practical perspectives. So, the study examined rural FHHs vulnerability to poverty at Libo Kemkem *Woreda* in Amhara Region by looking at the following guiding questions:

- How is the community including FHHs perceived and defined poverty?
- What are the major causes of FHHs' vulnerability to poverty?
- How FHHs cope with and respond to challenges they have faced? and
- How governmental and non-governmental organizations actions to mitigate poverty are perceived and interpreted by rural people in general and FHHs in particular?
- How FHHs are created and enjoyed being female headship?

3. Aim of the Study

This study aims at looking into the situation of poverty in FHHs in Libo Kemkem *Woreda* of Amhara Region. It also elucidates their survival strategies.

Based on the research problem stated above, this study has the following specific objectives.

- **i.** To explore the nature and the root causes of FHHs' vulnerability to poverty
- **ii.** To investigate the livelihood and coping strategies of FHHs
- **iii.** To assess programs in vogue both by the government and non-government organizations in avert poverty through people's opinion.
- **iv.** To examine the main features of rural FHHs

4. Research Methodology

The researcher has used both primary and secondary data for the writing of social processes. With regard to primary data, qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection and analysis were employed whereas in the secondary data source the researcher referred published and unpublished documents.

4.1 Primary Data Collection

Qualitative and quantitative methods were employed for primary data collection. The data collection focused mainly on causes of poverty, livelihood strategies and gender roles. Such data were needed to provide a better understanding of FHHs in relation to poverty. Therefore, the data collection designed for the study included individual interviews, observation, life stories, focus group discussions, and survey interview.

Both probability and non-probability sampling techniques were used based on the nature of the instruments for primary data collection. The subjects of key-informant interviews and participants in community group discussions were selected using purposive sampling techniques based on their deep experiences and knowledge. A total of 300 households were taken using random sampling techniques. Women informants from MHHs were interviewed for comparative purpose.

Regarding analysis of data, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. SPSS software was used. Besides descriptive statistics, the research outcomes were cross tabulated and then tested using statistical tools such as Independent T-Test and *probit* model.

4.2 Secondary Data Collection

Several secondary sources of information in the form of published and unpublished documents were used in this study to identify the socio-economic condition of women in general and FHHs in particular in rural areas. A detailed review of literature on women/FHHs and poverty in Ethiopia and other countries were conducted and relevant qualitative and quantitative information were extracted from publications, journals, magazines, newspapers, brochures, websites and other relevant sources.

5. Limitations of the Study

The major limitations that the study has faced were inconsistent meaning of female headships, absence of statistical information about FHHs, and paucity of income-expenditure data during household interview.

6. Findings

6.1 Livelihood bases and Vulnerability to Poverty of Female-headed Households

Poverty is a widespread phenomenon in the area of Libo Kemkem *Woreda*, South Gondar Administrative Zone of Amhara Region, Ethiopia. This area consists of 34 *kebele* administrations, of which 29 of them are rural. The rural areas are more vulnerable to different kinds of demographic, social, economic as well as natural induced problems. Thus, almost 22 out of 29 rural *kebeles* are more susceptible to chronic food insecurity. It covers more than 80 percent of the total population of the area. However, the degree of vulnerability to food insecurity and poverty varies from place to place as well as household to household. Resource poor individual and communities in general are more affected by the problem. FHHs can be mentioned as an example.

Rural FHHs are nowadays increasing from time to time in the area. One fourth of the population of Libo Kemkem *Woreda* is FHHs. On the contrast, they are resource poor segments of the society. For example, the most productive resources such as land, labor, oxen, and capital are the means to sustain once life in the rural areas; however, most FHHs with the exception of land lack these resources. Their

counterparts, MHHs are better off than FHHs in access to and control over productive assets; however, the resources are not equally distributed throughout households. Though the land owning pattern between the MHH and FHH does not show much variation (0.907 and 0.888 hectare) the other inputs like male adult labor, oxen, capital, and cultural taboo are critical in drifting the FHH to poverty stricken vulnerability. Moreover, lack of labor and oxen forced FHHs to rent/sharecrop out their farmlands. The *probit* model and independent T-test results show that the variables of labor, oxen, and capital have effect on vulnerability.

6.2 Survival Strategies of Female-headed Households

Women comprise half of the population of the study area of which FHHs share one fourth it. However, they are suffered from food security problems. The situations forced FHHs to resort different survival strategies so as to sustain the lives of them and dependents.

Households in the study area have been responding to droughts and vulnerability by employing various coping and adaptive strategies. Coping strategies employed by the study communities include ex-ante actions such as diversification of sources of income to ex-post actions adopted at times of distress such as reducing number and quantity of meals. Among a total of 20 different activities were recorded during the survey: only 17 of these were found among FHHs, and 12 among MHHs. Perhaps more striking is the fact that there are a few activities that female-headed and MHHs do not sometimes engage in. For instance, among agricultural activities, 97.4 percent of MHHs reported gaining income from work in crop production, compared to only 33.3 percent of FHHs. About 74.7 percent of the FHHs and 3.3 percent of MHHs earn income through sharecropping out farmland. Moreover, households sometimes resort to engage in risk taking activities if life situation becomes very awful. Nearly all have reported having adopted at least one coping mechanism. The most prevalent mechanisms for coping with food insecurity were reducing the number of meals per day, which accounted by 87.3 percent and 34 percent of female-headed and MHHs respectively. Hence, the proportion of households that have adopted one or more coping strategies in a community indicates the prevalence of food insecurity.

On the other hand, adaptive strategies used by the study communities include indigenous techniques, including (but not limited to) soil and water conservation, combination and diversification of annual and perennial crops production activities

and permanent resettlement program. Some of the adaptive strategies are mainly run by governmental as well as non-governmental organization interventions. For instance, government is used to design various policies and programs to improve the rural people's life. The preparation of the full poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) named as Sustainable Development and Poverty Reduction Program (SDPRP) is to mention one example. To meet the objectives of SDPRP, the government runs Productive Safety Net Programs (public works, household extension, and resettlement); land registration and certification; and natural resource conservations. However, lack of awareness, negative attitudes, negligence, and misuse of programs were some of the constraints to carry out the programs successfully.

In sum, FHHs face challenges while carrying out different activities. Lack of male income earner, child rising, limited job opportunities and feeble social supports were major constraints that FHHs are facing.

6.3 Formation of Female-headed Households

Many factors contributed to the formation of FHHs in the study area. Divorce, widowed, desertion and never married are among the factors that led to the formation of FHHs. For instance, families disintegrate due to impoverishment, diseases (like malaria, HIV/AIDS, water borne diseases), conflict over household resources, migration, adultery, sexual incompatibility, extravagancy, bareness, old age, the supremacy of the male are immediate factors for the disintegration of families, and finally led singleness whether through compulsion or not. Even though it is rarely found, there are cases where women do not get married totally because of their involvement in "despised" occupation such as tannery, pottery, etc. The community undermines those individuals who are labeled as slaves and evil eyed, and others who have health problems like leprosy, elephantiasis. Therefore, the aforementioned factors which generally termed as economic, social, health, culture and political processes are considered to be the prime factors for the rise of FHHs in the study community. Quantitative findings show that from the total of 150 FHHs about 48.7 percent and 43.3 percent of the total respondents are widowed and divorced respectively. Desertion accounted for 11 percent from the total respondents. The remaining 0.7 percent, which is so negligible were never married.

In this patriarchal community, loosing ones father or male spouse has showed psychosocial and economic impacts on members of families headed by female. Since male spouses are considered as bread winners and guardians of families, their death or absence immediately brings about household economic crises. This creates conditions that enforce women to work industriously more than before to feed family members. Besides, beyond the economic barriers created due to the death of male spouses, women who are heads of households suffer from male-favored social relationships.

The long term effects of women's exclusion from general social systems have been observed in detaining their contribution, knowledge, skill and experience in public places. Hence, the coming out of women in public places is a recent phenomenon which was previously considered as taboo. But, if we analyze males' position in the society, they are bestowed all the privileges available, including decision-making powers. In all social, economic and political matters of the community, males who are heads of households are considered to be eligible and capable since they are believed to have the necessary experiences, knowledge and skill. On the contrary, women, particularly heads of households, are excluded in matters for some reasons. In most cultural settings, as Sachs (1996) explained, rural women are evaluated from their connections to the environment, from their work in subsistence, reproductive and productive realms and from the patriarchal nature of rural families. This, in turn, negatively affected their social and economic status.

Currently, due to the campaign on rights of women at all levels, the awareness of the community in general and people in power in particular about women's rights have been improving. Both governmental and non-governmental organizations are participating in the campaign process. The changes brought in the community are now easily observed through the participation of women in public conferences and meetings like their male counterparts. Especially, women who are heads of households are highly participating in conferences and meetings at *Kebele, Woreda,* Zonal and Regional levels. This is a new change that needs to appreciate. The participation of women in public places has helped them to demand their rights of access to and control over agricultural resources such as land, labor, capital etc.

7. Remarks and Suggestions

The previous sections highlight the findings of the present research and it is stated that FHHs are increasingly vulnerable to chronic food insecurity, as their livelihood resources and strategies have been destabilized by the internal and external factors. The researcher suggests some ideas for consideration in planning for poverty reduction, enhancing FHHs resilience, and restricting the frequency of formation of FHHs.

7.1 Mitigate Female-Headed Households' Vulnerability to Poverty

The researcher proposes three ways to lessen FHHs vulnerability to chronic food insecurity.

First, eliminating discrimination against FHHs in particular and gradually ensure the protection of women's rights in general, joint involvement of all development stakeholders and government body is absolutely needed.

Second, there is a need to make free FHHs from cultural and traditional barriers in order to make self-sufficient. This is done through the coordination of the people and the government particularly Women, Youth, and Children Office. Local self-reliance, autonomy in the decision-making processes, provision of space for cultural assertion and spiritual welfare and social learning may tackle traditional and cultural barriers.

Third, fair treatment of FHHs during redistribution of resources will be a solution for the reduction of FHHs vulnerability to poverty.

7.2 Support Female-Headed Households' Efforts

FHHs insist support from the community, government, and non-government organizations so as to secure their sustainability. There is a need to see the problems of FHHs separately through

a) Widen job opportunities through income generating activities
b) Strengthen social security systems
c) Increase political participation at each level
d) Organize them to keep their rights

7.3 Reduce Triggering Factors for the Formation of Female-Headed Households

Equivalent measures should be taken in order to address the high frequency of FHHs through implementation of at least three actions.

First, the rural areas lacked sufficient infrastructures such as health centers, schools, transport, clean water, which eases the life of the society. The government as well as the people should take responsibility in establishing infrastructure facilities like health centers with necessary equipments, which enable to save life of many people that minimize the death rate. Moreover, elders should seriously engage in keeping the peace of the community through conflict resolution mechanisms besides the political appointed bodies since conflict sometimes arise due to land push, which finally led to the death of individuals. Death rate reduces the formation of widowed women.

Second, lack of full implementation of the family law and over shadowed by legal traditions provide more confidence to men to exercise authority over women. Men took much share during divorce through misuse of the family law. This triggers the formation of divorced women in the area. Thus, there is a need to serious implementation of the law.

Third, impoverishment of households has become triggering factor for the creation of divorced women in the study area. Sustainable build of assets through adoption of poverty reduction strategies should be implemented. For this, government has to take the lion's share of work in parallel with the involvement of the people. Since the rural people lack education, advocacy and awareness broke people's doubt and brought confidence. Moreover, establishment of Social Security Systems like Safety Net Program in sustainable manner make the people free from victims of impoverishment.

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